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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000062

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ HIGHLIGHTS COLOMBIAN HOSTAGE RELEASE,
BLAMES OTHERS FOR HIS GOVERNMENTS FAILURES

REF: A. CARACAS 15
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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Chavez used numerous events over the January 11-13 weekend to claim credit for the Colombian hostage release, urge international understanding for the FARC and to blame others, including the USG, for the failure of earlier efforts to secure release of the hostages. He also acknowledged the shortcomings of his own administration in its handling of breadbasket issues such as crime, food shortages and inflation. During his state-of-the-union address January 11, Chavez urged the international community to cease classifying the FARC and ELN as terrorist organizations. He also floated the possibility of initiating a recall referendum on his presidency combined with another constitutional referendum to permit him to be re-elected when his current term expires. During the opening congress of his new unified party, he called on his supporters to focus on winning the November 2008 state and local elections and on his ministers to address domestic problems. His attempts to distance himself from the failures of his own government and to blame others, including the USG, has proven a successful strategy in the past. This and his reshuffling of his cabinet without major new names signal a continuation of previous policies, albeit perhaps at a slower pace, as well as an attempt to rebuild his base following the December 2 failure of his constitutional amendments. End Summary.

Chavez: FARC, ELN Not Terrorists

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Ambassador, with most of the rest of the diplomatic corps, attended President Chavez's four-hour state-of-the-union address on January 11 at the National Assembly, where Chavez initially focused on the Venezuela-led January 10 recovery of two Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) hostages and his proposal to achieve peace in Colombia. He called on Latin American and European countries to remove the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) from their lists of terrorist organizations and to recognize them as "insurgent forces" with political objectives. Chavez characterized the two groups as "legitimate armies" with "Bolivarian" goals. He argued that recognition of the FARC and ELN as political actors could represent the first step toward a peace agreement in Colombia. The Venezuelan

president asserted that the designation of the FARC and ELN as terrorist groups resulted from USG "pressure." These statements may have undermined his support within the region.

Subsequently Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and Guatemalan President Alvaro Colon issued press statements indicating they did not support Chavez's position on the matter. The Argentine government noted its willingness to work towards the liberation of all hostages, but drew the line at changing the status of the FARC and ELN.

Chavez Comes Clean: Again Floats Indefinite Re-election

¶3. (SBU) Three hours into his National Assembly address, Chavez floated the possibility of again trying to amend the constitution so that he can remain in power after his current term expires. Chavez said he might consider initiating a recall referendum on his presidency and would put on the same ballot a referendum eliminating presidential term limits. He indicated it would be at least two years before he might initiate the process. He suggested that if he lost the recall or the referendum he would leave office in 2013.

Failure to Govern

¶4. (C) Chavez also attempted to distance himself from the failures of his government. He admitted that his administration has not done enough to address the day-to-day problems of Venezuelans, such as crime, inflation and food shortages. He urged his cabinet to announce their policy initiatives for 2008 and also make tangible efforts to tackle corruption within the government. On the economic front, Chavez took personal credit for rising oil prices and cited positive economic growth indicators. Tellingly, he often

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compared the economy in 2007 statistically with data from 1999 (when he was first elected) and at times even 1996 figures rather than 2006 figures, which would have shown a more problematic trend in many areas. He also implicitly blamed the United States for the failures of his government, indicating it was funding a "fifth column" - a vibrant NGO community - to undermine his administration. He urged pro-government circles to remain "united" in their fight against the "empire."

PSUV Congress Underway

¶5. (SBU) Before more than 1600 delegates attending the January 12 opening congress of Chavez's United Socialist Party (PSUV), Chavez lamented his electoral defeat December 2, particularly over his poor showing in traditional bastions of Chavez support. He urged party members to deliver him resounding victories in the gubernatorial and mayoral elections slated for November. He warned that if the opposition wins key states and Caracas boroughs, the "empire" will order them to "come after" him.

¶6. (SBU) Chavez also reversed his policy for most of 2007 of trying to pressure pro-government parties to join PSUV. He noted his willingness to form an electoral coalition of "revolutionary movements," with PSUV at the forefront, that would include those small pro-government parties, such as the Communist Party and Patria Para Todos (PPT), that have thus far declined to join the PSUV.

Colombia Remains on Chavez's Mind

¶7. (SBU) Chavez dedicated a considerable portion of his

televised January 13 "Alo, Presidente" program to his Colombian peace efforts and the possible recreation of a "Grand Colombia." At times he lashed out at Colombian officials for terminating his role as FARC mediator in December 2007, while subsequently hoping for improved bi-lateral relations. He continued to press the Government of Colombia to recognize the FARC and ELN as "insurgent forces," saying that such a move would force them to abide by the Geneva Convention and thus cease taking hostages. Chavez dismissed reports that the FARC and ELN are holding as many as 64 Venezuelan hostages.

Comment

18. (C) Chavez's position on the FARC and ELN surprised most local observers and was widely criticized by the independent (and largely opposition) media. His apparent willingness to reach out to pro-government currents outside of the PSUV and his focus on the failures of his government indicates that he perceives he has a problem with his own base and that it will be important to make progress on breadbasket issues to prevent further erosion. Whether real change or greater competence in governance is a possibility remains a fundamental question because so many of the cabinet changes simply shuffled familiar faces into new positions. Chavez will likely spend more time working directly on building his unified party and on rebuilding his base. His return to his well-used tactic of blaming others for his government's failures is not surprising.

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